

Dialog on Visual Culture and Education for the XXI Century

An interview with
Professor Paul Duncum

By **João Pedro Fróis**

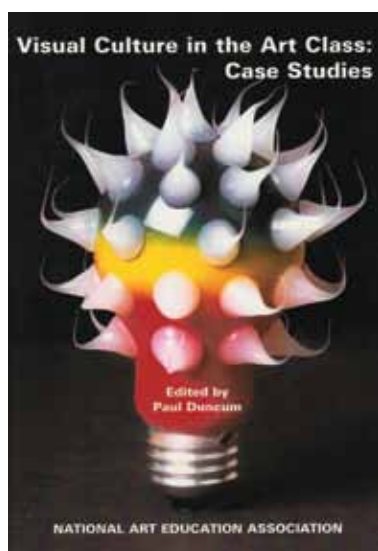
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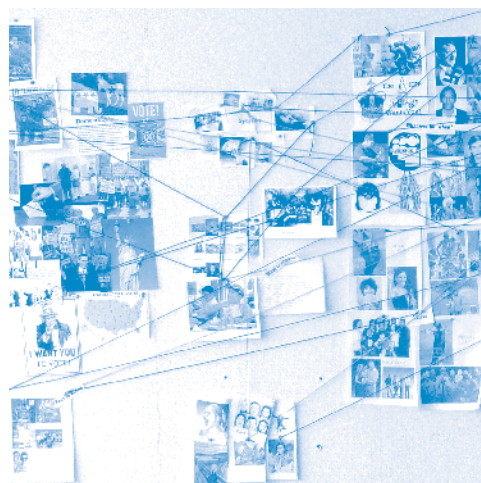


Professor Paul Duncum is the Chairperson of the Art Education Division, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, USA. He obtained his PhD from The Flinders University of South Australia in 1987 on the subject of children's unsolicited drawing from a cultural perspective. Author of many articles on children's drawing and popular visual culture and their relation to art education, as well as editor of the 2006 book – Visual Culture in the Art Class: Case Studies, he is a leading advocate for visual culture in art education.



João Pedro Fróis – What distinguishes the essence of the modern age, as Heidegger said, is that the world is conceived and grasped as a picture. Why is this concept of our world as “visuality” so important nowadays?

Paul Duncum – It is often said that we have taken a visual turn as significant as the literary turn western societies took towards the end of the 19th century. Now people obtain both their entertainment and their information through forms that are significantly visual and where there is a conflict between picture and other kinds of text – words in particular – visual communication is the more powerful because vision is the dominant sense. Long ago I found that students would go to the library to research a topic and instead of asking for the books that might be relevant they would ask for the video. Everyday life has now become visual in the sense that so much of what we know about the world beyond personal experience is now mediated through primarily or at least significantly through visual media. The term visuality tries to capture this but also the fact that aspects of life that were previously encoded mathematically or in words are now visualised. Also, the term captures the approach that we take to much of the unmediated world, and here the concept of the gaze is very important. For example, recently some art educators here in the U.S. have talked about the actuarial gaze, the gaze we have when assessing risk, a gaze they claim that dominates social life following September 11. The term visuality I think of as a superordinate term, capturing all the images we look at but also how we look at the non mediated world. It is a bit like the agenda of philosophical aesthetics, which considers art but also beyond art to consider the natural world.



We all know that any definition is provisional and subject to changes but I would first like to know how you define Visual Culture?

I think of visual culture, first, in very inclusive terms because quite widely different disciplines use the term. If we think first of all of the images themselves there is probably as many surveillance images produced and viewed as any other kind. Then there are medical and any number of kinds of scientific images. And the number of these increases all the time with new technologies. These images are primarily functional, concerned with criminality and terrorism, diagnosis and information gathering. In terms of their normal primary function, they are data. Sometimes they cross into the arena of symbol, of ideas, of values and beliefs, for example when a surveillance image becomes the centre of a social controversy, but most of the time they remain outside the concerns of art educators. Art educators are interested in another kind of function, those that deal with ideas, beliefs and values about who we are. Roughly speaking there tends to be three kinds though again they overlap. There is fine art which has been almost the only kind art education has dealt with up until recently, at least here in the U.S. Then there is mass popular art which is produced mostly by large corporations whose primary concern is to make money. Then there is the popular culture that ordinary people produce which used to be called folk art but now often takes an electronic form and is put out for the whole electronically connected world

to see. These three kinds of image making continually interact to form hybrids. It is these three kinds of imagery that I think we are interested in as art educators.

Then there is the word culture, which deals with the life of images: How do they function within their context? How do they contribute to a way of life, or ways of life, or since we live in hierarchical societies, how do images function in terms of ways of struggle?

Can we use Brent Wilson's metaphor saying that Art Education is like a tree with roots, a trunk and branches, and Visual Culture is a rhizome in Deleuze's definition?

I find Wilson's approach very helpful. I introduce his distinction to my students as the flora model by which to distinguish a modernist art curriculum from a postmodern curriculum. I will show some examples of this when I am presenting in Portugal at the Berardo Collection Museum.

A number of art educators including you, Kerry Freedman, Kevin Tavin, Graeme Chalmers and Arthur Efland think that art education in visual arts should make a transition to a visual culture studies orientation. Since when has this transition become urgent and why do we need it now in schools and art museums?

One argument that Kerry sometimes uses is that art in schools is so often boring. She is right because there are good reasons to be bored. What is the point of colour and tone and line and so on? A lot of art education is about someone else's culture and even then it is viewed through formal means that do not connect with students' actual experience of the world, a world in which they are adept at visual technologies. As visual technologies change and increase in number and influence, what is the sense of dealing with a very particular formal approach developed at the beginning of the last century to deal with modernist paintings that even in the fine art world no longer play a part of any contemporary conversation.

The sociological, political, cultural, economic, sexual, and generational concerns inherent to the study of the visual culture are long established in literature on Art Education. [In Europe, in the early seventies Hermann Ehmer e Hein Moller defended a radical need of approaching Art Education. For them "visual communication is the communication of the dominant class". Their ideas about the arts, aesthetics and social transformation were based on K. Marx, W. Benjamin, T. Adorno, J. Habermas, R. Barthes and others. Some of these philosophers framed the current Visual Culture approach.] Is Visual Culture a "newly coloured old idea» as recently remarked by Kevin Tavin?

Well nothing is entirely new, as Kevin demonstrates in his paper on the antecedents to the current movement. But there are significant differences between most of the cultural theorists you mention and the frameworks people are working from today. The Frankfurt School were dismissive of the "masses" seeing them as an unruly, emotionally vulnerable mob, the victims of corporate bosses. They operated with a clear-cut distinction between fine art – for them the only sign of revolutionary hope left – and popular culture, which they saw as utterly degenerate. They regarded most people as mere dupes, sad victims of their false consciousness. I do not know the art educators you mention but in the English speaking world many art educators were influenced by this kind of thinking and saw the fine arts as a defence against no less than the breakdown of all they held to be worthwhile in life. Art education was viewed as a kind of educational condom. With the distinction between high and low

culture now seriously blurred, at both the point of production and consumption, and a new respect for the intelligence of audiences, considering popular culture is now more about critical awareness of one's numerous, often ambiguous, often contradictory, relationships than it is with saving humanity from itself.

Do you think that reconceptualising art education as visual culture education would be the natural transition of the field of art education namely in the “western countries”? To what extent art education in American schools does take visual culture “on board”?

Not just in western countries. If you go to many parts of Asia, they are way ahead of the U.S. in the penetration of technologies that deliver imagery. Also VCBE implies certain approaches that are applicable irrespective of what part of the world we are addressing. Concepts like seduction, ideology, the gaze, audience and so on apply everywhere – or at least I imagine they would.

Regarding the second part of your question: Everything here – the whole country – is so diversified or fragmented. There is no national curriculum and none is ever likely. And to my knowledge no research has been done on the extent to which VC has penetrated classrooms. If what turns up as the primary interest of teachers at state and national conferences are anything to go by, visual culture has had very little impact. There is a lot of interesting classroom projects reported on in the literature of art education, but from what I can tell they do not represent the norm. For teachers trained in modernism, it is very difficult to make the shift because as your next question implies, a different mindset is required. It is probably more difficult in the U.S. where pop culture is the national culture and the fine arts are so poorly supported by governments. I suspect the relationship between the fine arts and pop culture is easier in countries where art educators do not feel the need always to be defending fine arts; they do not I suspect need to take a defensive position in the way modernist U.S. art teachers feel they have no alternative. At least this is true of my own country of Australia where the fine arts are valued by the government.



Can we consider Visual Culture-based Art Education as a paradigm similar to Education through Art and Discipline-Based Art Education?

Yes, I think so. If we think of a paradigm as not only a proposal that is significantly different from what has come before plus practioners operating on the basis of that proposal, I think it is fair now to say that a paradigm shift has occurred. But it operates in the classroom among a limited number of teachers. Looking at the literature that reports on classroom practice and looking at typical classrooms is quite different.

You wrote that “Visual Culture is a more inclusive category than the study of the institutionalized Art World”. Could you please go into more detail about that?

I address this above, at least in part, under question 2. Of course the institutional art world is not what it used to be. It has opened its doors to bring in selected kinds

of vernacular and popular art, and while it now relies more and more on commercial enterprise it still largely operates without a market imperative, and so it is able to function differently from popular art. I like Raymond Williams distinction between residual culture, dominant culture and emergent culture. While popular mass culture is dominant in being tied to the dominant forms of economic arrangements in society, namely capital, the institutional art world plays the very important function of offering alternatives, including opposition. The institutional art world deals with the art of the past as well as art that attempts to articulate new ideas, neither of which are tied directly to a consumer market and thus can avoid carrying the message consume and think about things like the majority do.

Visual culture studies are described by its proponents as being fluid and subject to “debate” and a “resolutely interdisciplinary” field. The visual culture theorists are using the concepts culture and visual. They define their topic not as ART but as Visual Culture. How can we help teachers in public schools to manage with such conceptual complexities linked to these two concepts?

One approach I notice some colleagues using is to refer to whatever they are talking about – a TV program, a movie – as art. And if we think of art as primarily a means of communicating beliefs and values, they are quite right to do so. Of course most teachers I meet have only the slightest knowledge of art theory, which is a hurdle in itself. Mostly, teachers work from popular theories of expression and form. The literature of art theory is something many of them do not even know exists. But the training of new teachers is another matter.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding Visual Culture proposes a world in which the visual has become dominant. Visual art and museum educators are obviously in advantage over other educators in preparing people to live and learn in a visual environment. How can these meaning making mediators be “trained” to develop such complex and multi-entrance approaches to the visual?

Given the extend to which they have been exposed to modernist ideas from their art teachers, turning students onto an issue-based, postmodern curriculum has its challenges at times. But mostly I find many trainee teachers quite sympathetic because they are already postmodern and post-structural. Now when I explain postmodernism verses modernism many of them find modernism quite weird; instead of struggling with postmodernism they have difficulty understanding how anyone could ever have adopted modernist assumptions.

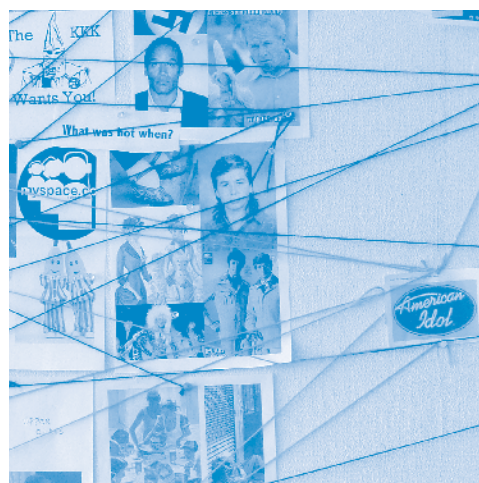
Just to indicate how different is their world from mine - the other day an undergraduate asked his undergraduate class how many of them had been text messaged in the past 10 minutes – this was about half an hour into my class – and half of them raised their hands. This was a revelation to me; so much activity employing technology was going on right under my nose without me having a clue. These young people are already ‘hip’ to new ways of thinking about imagery. But they need guidance of course; their experience needs to be channelled. So I show them video documentaries on visual culture that challenge them, including an exploration of Disney movies with which they grew up and in which they have strong affective investments. Then things get really interesting as they grapple with a critique of their favourite cultural sites. We start making movies and create hypertexts, and they teach me about stuff I could never have imagined. I learn

and they feel empowered. This is a generational dialogue where we learn from each other. One productive method is to examine media stereotypes of people in one's class. Once African American students reflect on how they are often represented – and this applies to other minorities – students start to see representation as a construction and not a mirror.

We know that the shift of from “Art” to Visual Culture represent an essential change in the orientation of art in education. [This intentional shift from the movement of Self-Expression represented by Victor Lowenfeld or Arno Stern to Discipline-Based Art Education as advocated by Ralph Smith, Stephen Dobbs or Elliot Eisner or others frameworks was really a shift of approach and not of subject matter. We know that the primary goal of one of the proponents of the disciplinary approach in the USA Professor Manuel Barkan was to include the visual arts, which meant the talking about art and aesthetics, in the school curriculum.] What are the goals of Visual Culture-Based Art Education in public schools today?

DBAE proponents were concerned to offer the fine arts as an alternative to what students enjoyed; their goal was primarily to have students appreciate the fine arts, which often boiled down to self-expression and form. I would say that the primary goal of VCBA is a critical consciousness rather than appreciation. Though I would not want to minimise the difficulties here. Critical theory translated into critical pedagogy is problematic. I prefer to think of a playful pedagogy.

While the Art Museum is at the centre of the historical practice of Art, it is not often at the centre of Popular Culture. We no longer know the museum just by going to see it. We, as Suzanne Oberhardt pointed out in her book *Frames within Frames* (2001), visit it in our daily lives in many other ways, via magazines, computer screens, movies or billboards. What is the role of the art museum in western popular culture?



It is to offer an alternative. The values implicit in images from the past are often active today; even the act of conserving seems oppositional to the ephemeral qualities of most pop imagery. Some of the older work is just interesting in offering an insight into life long ago, a bit like being fascinated by dinosaurs. But much of it is about love and compassion and respecting traditions which stand apart from hedonistic consumption. And then the art museum is also a place where new stuff that could not survive as a commercial enterprise is offered a voice, in what Williams calls post-market conditions.

What are your suggestions concerning the development of a curriculum for visual culture inside the walls of Art Museums?

I have not considered this before, so the following is underdeveloped. In the most general terms I would operate from the assumptions I make above. With regard to pedagogy we need to dethrone the authoritative voice of the art expert and enter into a post-structural dialogue. Students who feel safe enough to speak their minds will frequently have much to say that teachers can learn from. So, in front of an image

the conversation needs to be about what students think as much as the teacher, with the teacher acting as guide.

In your recent article “9 Reasons for the continuing use of an aesthetic discourse in art education” published in *Art Education* (2007) you emphasize the need of maintaining an aesthetic mode of thinking in art education. What kind of refinements do we need when we are using the ambiguous and polysemantic concept of aesthetics in the visual culture-based art education?

Aesthetics is an exceptionally difficult word because its original proposal as a contribution to the socio-political dynamics of the very early 19th century, as well as its continuing history, has been to lend support to conservative, reactionary, and progressive agendas. My strategy has been to go back to the Greek word from which it is derived, which meant sense perception and was intended to distinguish between what could be perceived and what could only be imagined. In short, I seek to use it to describe sensory lures. These include the traditional categories of the beautiful and the sublime that Kant and so many others proposed as exclusive categories in the 18th century. But sensory lures must also include what Kant and the modernists were so determined to exclude, that is, the vulgar and the vile, as well as the dulling and lulling and the overbearing. Each of these either have their appeal or however unpleasant, are used by image-makers to influence thought and feeling. So we need a concept of aesthetics that includes both the life enhancing and life destroying. Both are out there; both are being used. We need a view of aesthetics that recognises the body, not just the mind. And of course employing post-structuralism we have to acknowledge the fact that what I find ugly someone else could find beautiful, and so on.

Can you please point out the most important reasons that you evoked in your paper for the Visual Culture-Based Art Education that educators need to consider in their school or art museum activities?

I have sometimes put this rather negatively: pictures often lie. More positively, images are constitutive of our beliefs and values, our ideas about the world and ourselves. They offer models that tell us what the world is about, what it should be about and what it should not be about. And art education gets to be really exciting when we open up dialogue with students about these descriptions, prescriptions and proscriptions.

Does it make any sense to talk about aesthetic experience in visual culture-based art education? Or does this concept no longer make any sense?

I think aesthetics remains very important but reconceptualised as I do above. An alternative is to drop the term because it means so many different things and adopt other terms. I am presently playing with the words seduction and sensory lure.

What kind of “practical examples” in education for Visual Culture can you give? Is there anything beyond the examples you discussed in *Visual Culture in the Art Class: Case Studies* edited by you for the National Art Education Association in 2006?

I can show some examples from my class and will do so when I present in Portugal. For a fairly comprehensive survey I did of the literature in English – my only language

alas – of K-12 classrooms someone really keen could look at my chapter “What we are learning about teaching popular visual culture” in a book edited by Jeong Ae Park called *Art Education as Critical Cultural Inquiry* published back in 2007.

Your early studies in Art Education were focused on the subject of children’s unsolicited drawing from a cultural perspective. Donna Kelly in her book *Uncovering the History of Children’s Drawing and Art* (2004) says that the examination of children’s drawing can be separated into two paradigms: the psychological Mirror and the aesthetic Windows paradigms. The Mirror paradigm is characteristic of a psychological focus on children’s picture-making. The second is an aesthetic perspective followed by those working in the art community – “Children’s art serves a Window on the world to make a fragment of that world visible (...) The aesthetic Window practitioners value the children’s picture-making for its artistic value”. What do you think about that approach to the children’s drawing’s?

Many art educators have confused aesthetic development with artistic development. They have conflated them and applied their particular aesthetic prejudices to development, which has not served children well. Gardner is a fairly recent example but many came before him. They applied a modernist aesthetic, celebrating the free flowing approach of young children, damning their drawing when they tighten up during middle childhood and then celebrating their work in adolescence when children more self-consciously adopted a self-expressive style. If we think of art as a means to develop ideas, values and beliefs in visual form, then the imposition of a particular aesthetic makes no sense. Kids who draw comic strips or draw realistically but not well are nevertheless exploring the word. You only have to talk to kids about their image making to find this out. Modernists just looked at the pictures. It is necessary to understand children’s pictures, like all picture making, in terms of its context. Using drawings as a psychological mirror is equally fraught with danger. Again, the approach was often to diagnose conditions, or just mental development, from the drawings alone. Again, you need to consider all kinds of factors before you can speculate on how a drawing might indicate how the subconscious is writ large or whether it is an indicator of other kinds of mental development. All development is discipline specific. Context is always as important, if not more so, than the text. And in many ways this is the difference between a modernist view that relies on an idealistic view of knowledge and a post-modern view that is founded on a contextualistic epistemology.

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